

ART FROM BEHIND BARS

Prison Arts Project Comes of Age



Will Cantrell in front of mural Morning Water Ceremony

By Tai Moses

Soledad Prison is a large rambling complex of steel and concrete, surrounded by fences topped with an endless coil of razor-sharp concertina wire that gleams painfully against the flat blue sky like the first scratch on a new car. There are 5,000 inmates living here, two to a cell, doing thousands of years of accumulated time, years of boredom, rage and loneliness. Think of 5,000 guys sitting in air, each brooding over the oppressive terms of his confinement, and you wonder how they get anything in the way of "rehabilitation" out of that experience.

The introduction of the arts in prison has been shown to have a profound effect on the quality of life and the attitudes of prisoners. Art enables people to experience themselves instead of simply reacting to their environment. In detention, art is a way for inmates to express themselves positively, to feel that even locked away, they too are still valuable.

The Prison Arts Project, sponsored by the Santa Cruz-based William James Association, contracts with over 50 artists in Northern California to teach visual, performing and theater arts, music, writing and poetry in the California prison system. Due to the continuing efforts of the P&P and the California Arts-In-Corrections program, there has been a massive reduction in disciplinary actions against participating inmates, and almost 70 percent of those do not return to prison.

Nigel Sanders-Self is an actor who lives in Santa Cruz and teaches theater arts at Soledad, the only Northern California prison that has a theater arts program. Soledad is a penitentiary that once was very rough, more violent than many prisons, but there's so much art down there now, Sanders-Self says, that "the place is buzzing."

The inmates in Sanders-Self's workshop will perform three plays, including Edward Albee's *Zoo Story* and *The Dumbwaiter* by Harold Pinter, in November for the general inmate population. They are collaborating with two other P&P workshops, taught by Roberta Ruiz and Bill Hampton, to design sets and perform music. "The guys in my class are as good as any professional actors I've worked with," says Sanders-Self. "A lot of bullshit goes on in prison and people have to pretend they're something they're not. Their life in prison outside my class is very difficult, and then they come into the workshop and they're able to create something."

Vicci Sulski has been teaching drawing and posters at Soledad for three years. As an artist, sometimes she feels the psychological drain of teaching in prison, but she has seen significant changes in inmates through the arts programs. "These are the kind of people who need help," she says, "who need love, who need attention, and that's what they get through this program. They get a sense of self-esteem. They find out that they can do something."

Most of the inmates in her classes don't care much for abstract art; they want to be able to draw realistically. In terms of what they like in art, they seem to want to make reality better than it is. Maybe their view of reality is a bit fantastic, Sulski says, which may help explain why some of them are

don't, they survive. Most of them turn the situation around."

Life in prison is life in a glass house. The inmates, their behavior, their deeper states of mind are under constant scrutiny. They must follow endless rules and regulations, dos and don'ts. The arts program helps open their imagina-



Jose Torres, Berto Mezo, Will Cantrell, Doug Chapman, Artid-In-Residence Guillermo Aranda and Michael McGee

In prison is the first place: "Once I asked them, what would you do if you ever got out of prison? They said things like, 'Oh, I'd want to be rich, have a big house with a swimming pool, a car,' and I'd say, well, how are you going to get it? In other words, the dream was here and reality was there. They didn't make their dreams within the grasp of reality."

"I keep thinking when I go down there," she adds, "what would I do if I were there, and I keep thinking I'd kill myself. But these people

tion, doors that have habitually been kept shut.

"The whole thing about art," says Bill Hampton, who teaches guitar and recording at the prison, "is that art is freedom. Arts-In-Corrections is a sense of release for these people which they seldom get otherwise." Hampton, a professional musician and member of the Santa Cruz group Rush Hour, holds his music classes in Central Facility, Soledad's maximum security area.

"What's good about interacting in that environment," he says, "is that

everything's right out on the table. If you don't have your shit together, people will tell you. I can deal with some of these guys a lot better than I can with club owners."

He teaches the inmates how to use the recording equipment and has set the program up so it can run itself, even when he's not there. "There are some very tal-

"If this society would emphasize art a little more in people's lives I think we would have less crime, less problems."

—Guillermo Aranda

ented musicians there," Hampton says. "I often run into people that I've played music with here in Santa Cruz, or just seen around town, that are now incarcerated." Working with prisoners, he feels, enables him to try and rechannel some of his advantages back into the community. "Being black in this society, I just feel like I sort of owe that to people. It could just as easily be me there behind bars."

Over in North, the medium security wing, Artist Facilitator Jack Bowers, a full-time Department of Corrections employee, sat in on a

couple of tunes with one of the bands. There are 20 inmate bands at Soledad playing all types of music; this one calls itself "Four" although only three, Matthew, Kevin and Dalton, were present; the fourth member was in lock-down.

Matthew, the guitarist, played in Pure Funk and several other Bay Area bands. "We're all from the Bay Area," said Kevin. They played a soulful version of "Wave" with Jack at the keyboard. "We try to branch out," Dalton said, "do a little of everything."

The practice room is crowded with equipment, some of it donated, some purchased with Dept. of Corrections funds. An oversized painting of a wilder Michael Jackson looms on one wall, an orange halo above his head. Signs and warnings are posted everywhere in the room: Keep Your Feet Off the Walls. Keep Clear. Hands Off. Out of Bounds. STOP. Keep Out. Don't Come In. Keep Out Unless Assigned or Be Awarded a 115 (disciplinary notice).

"This is a place where a person can come and if he's upset he can

would help to open up these walls visually, that was really important to the guys," he says. Of Mexican-American and Apache descent, Aranda's work reflects a lot of his culture and background. Spirit buffalo and horses formed from clouds drift through the mural, a giant bald eagle hovers over a herd of bison streaming down a mountain. Your eye is pulled into the depths of the painting, drawn to trees, water, sky, bird, mammoth and rock, expanding the immediate world beyond the low ceiling of the prison classroom, the narrow cell blocks, the guard in the tower.

The section of the mural being worked on at present is darker than the first completed panel, luminous with stars, winter and night. Lightning cuts across the sky, snow gathers, and in a fish-eye lens view, a huge wave swallows a city. "We haven't seen the whole mural together yet," says Doug, one of the inmate artists. Most of the group has been working on the mural since the beginning, over 18 months ago. Will assists Guillermo, helping the other inmates with their technique. Ninety percent of

wants to get involved. That's the kind of person I am." He takes classes in all the arts, writes poetry in Juan Felipe Herrera's writing workshop. "I guess I owe Guillermo a lot," Jose says. "It's all because of him."

The artists approach their work at Soledad with obvious dedication to and respect for the inmates. Claudia Parrish, office manager of PAF, says artists are sent in to teach art, but they also function as role models. "It's just a different world inside," she says. "All these artists are very, very special people."

"I see a lot of good things in them," says Aranda, "and I don't check into their records as to why they're here. It's what's happening

now that matters."

Although tremendous improvements have been made in the quality of prison life through programs like Arts-In-Corrections and the Prison Arts Project, the artists are aware that prisons are not the solution to society's ills. Prisons are more overcrowded than ever and the recidivism rate is depressingly high, demonstrating the ineffectiveness of warehousing people and levying punishment in terms of days, months and years.

"Everybody needs to express themselves creatively in one way or another," says Aranda. "If this society would emphasize art a little more in people's lives I think we would have less crime, less prob-

lems. There were times in my life when I was very frustrated, very angry, and if I wouldn't have had a canvas to take it out on there's no telling where I'd be right now."

The Prison Arts Project is celebrating its 10th anniversary with an exhibit of Prison Art Competition winners from all over the state, opening Oct. 16, 5:30pm to 7pm, at 303 Potrero, Suite 128, San Francisco. The reception will be followed by a poetry reading by prison poets and their teachers at 7pm at the Poet and Patriot. A third anthology of prison writings, About Time III, is due out in November. For more information, call 426-2474.



Matthew in the practice room of North Facility, Soledad Prison

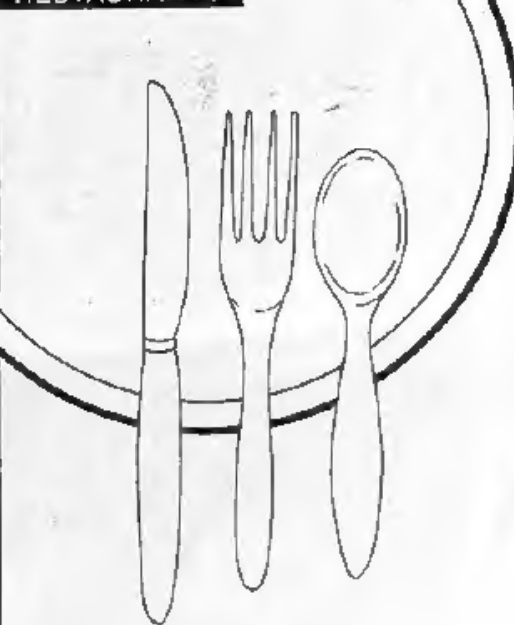
pick up an instrument and get it out of him," said Matthew. He ran down the chord changes for Jack, and the band launched into a melodic rendition of an old George Benson hit.

Washington artist Guillermo Aranda has been artist-in-residence at Soledad for three years. He works with a group of 12 or 13 inmates on an ongoing mural project in North Facility. "We decided that we wanted to do something that

the guys had never picked up a brush before, he says. "They always want to be able to do it themselves, they wish they didn't need any help." He smiles, "Sometimes we have to cover up what they do."

Berto works quietly on the left, painting grass. Jose draws some white on the mural. "I just put this white on without knowing what to do next," he says. He shrugs and deftly turns it into ice patches. "The pen does give us a lot of opportunities," he says. "You just got to be the kind of person who

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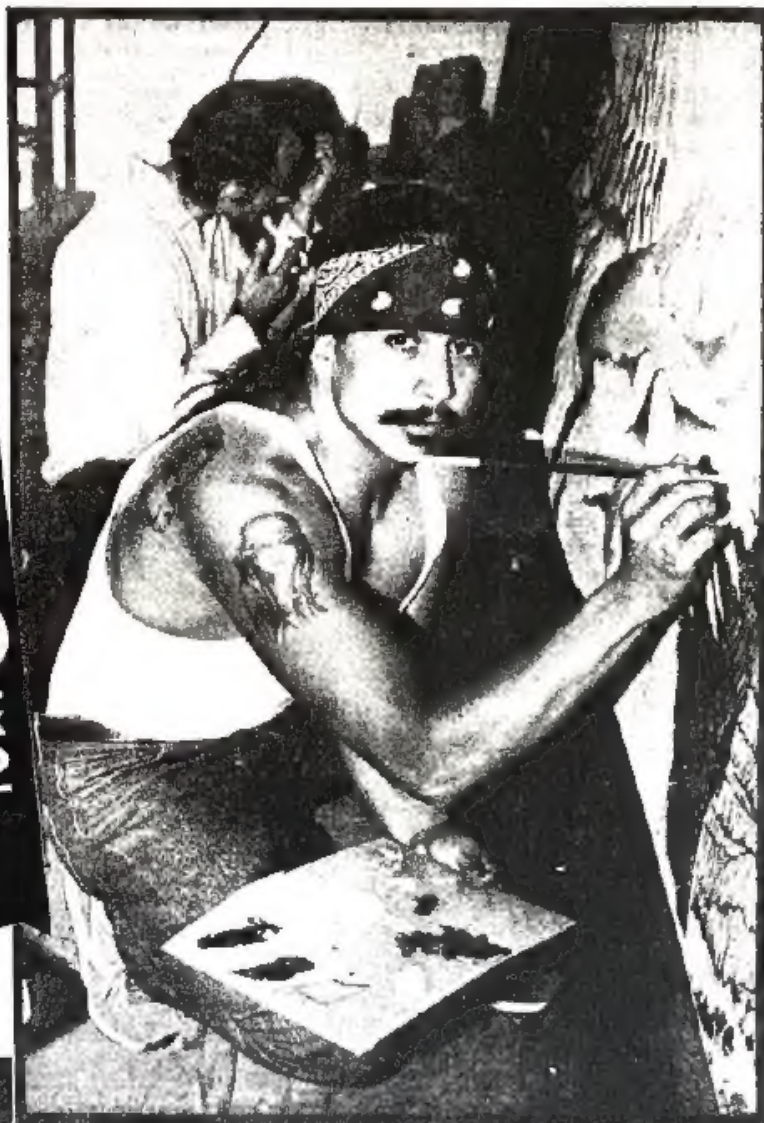
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